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"WHAT IT TAKES TO BE A MAN": A COMPARISON OF

MASCULINITY AND SEXUALITY IN *REBEL WITHOUT A*

CAUSE AND *RIVER'S EDGE*

By

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"What it Takes to Be a Man": A Comparison of Masculinity and Sexuality in *Rebel without*

a Cause and *River's Edge*

"What can you do when you have to be a man?" Jim Stark (James Dean) asks

this seemingly simple question of his father in *Rebel without a Cause*, expecting a clear

answer. Mr. Stark's (Jim Backus) inability to respond to his son definitively, however,

points directly to a question of masculinity. Why couldn't he give his son a "straight"

answer? Was it because Mr. Stark, himself, was unsure of "what it takes to be a man" or

was it because there was more than one way to answer the question? At first glance, it

would seem as though the 1950s offered only one acceptable model of masculinity to

follow, a tough, hyper-masculine male. The same can be said for the 1980s, a decade in

which tough males were constantly seen on screen and counter-cultural notions about

masculinity and sexuality were largely ignored or subdued. Jim's question about

masculinity motivates an investigation of America during the 1950s and the 1980s, two

decades that advocated similarly narrow perspectives on masculinity and sexuality.

The 1950s saw the birth of the teenager. The Eisenhower era was one of post-war

prosperity and conservatism, a time of conventionality and conformity, but tumultuous

social issues, such as civil rights, were simmering beneath the surface. The 1980s, which

saw a resurgence of interest in the teenager, might initially be described in the same way.

The Reagan years also proved to be a time of conservatism with major social issues, such

as gay rights and women's liberation, at full boil. The similarity between the two decades points to and prompts a comparison of the representation of teens in films produced during each era. I will compare one of the most popular films from the 1950s, *Rebel without a Cause,* to an important 1980s film, *River's Edge*, using cultural studies to analyze what these films reveal about the complexities of masculinity and sexuality. While many methods of study have been used in the past, much of the scholarship done on teens in film has been done to survey and give plot summaries rather than to analyze their ideological frameworks. As a result, I will use cultural studies to investigate the films. Using this method, I will be able to dig beneath the surface layers of the films and determine what ideological messages they send about adolescence and gender. On the ideological level, I believe that the films offer multiple models of masculinity, various forms of homosocial bonds, and veiled messages about homosexuality.

While the study of teens in films is a rather new area of analysis in film studies, there is already an extensive amount of scholarship that can be found on the topic. Using genre analysis, socio-cultural approaches, and reception studies, many scholars have focused on teens in films. The most prevalent approach to analyzing the teen film is genre studies. Robert Bulman describes genres as "clusters of films that share a similar style, form, and content" (1-2). He goes on to state that "the clustering of films into genres helps us to identify which versions of 'reality' are particularly salient to the culture that produces and consumes them" (Bulman 2). Genres are films that can be organized by distinct characteristics, plots, characters, and styles and are dependent on specific formulas. According to Wheeler Winston Dixon, genre films "are really serials in which formulaic thrills and entertainment are dispensed in two hour bursts" (131).

Timothy Shary, a major scholar in the field, has been instrumental in identifying a genre devoted to the representation of teenagers, the teen genre, films where the "emphasis is on teenage characters…between the ages of twelve and twenty" (*Generation* 17). Shary is a proponent of genre analysis, a method of study that "considers patterns, motifs, and trends across a spectrum of film that share a commonality, usually subject matter and theme and further explores how the elements of a genre are manifested and changed over time" (Shary *Generation* 11). In addition to Shary, many critics have used this method of study to analyze the genre of teen film, including Jonathan Bernstein and David Considine.

This method of approaching the teen genre does have its advantages. Analyzing films in this way provides a great deal of information not only on the content of the films, but also on common features that may be found across the genre. The extensive genre analysis performed by Timothy Shary in particular gives a great deal of information pertaining to the teen films from the 1980s, foregrounding the genre and giving all the basic information and plot points about virtually any teen film from that time in history. Genre analysis is also helpful in that it shows trends of the genre over time. "Genre brings…coherence to disparate subject matter, permits easy movement from particular close description to general qualitative prescription, and, not least, acknowledges the common sense…of a movie's membership in a wider filmic community" (Turner 10). The data provided by genre studies also yields detailed information as to when certain changes occur across history. On the other hand, however, defining the teen genre as Shary does collapses adult melodramas featuring teens with teen pics, a specific Hollywood product featuring teens and aimed at teens.

There is another reason, however, why genre analysis is an insufficient method for approaching film and an unsatisfactory method to use in my analysis of teen films. Genre analyses discuss major plot points about films, but avoid the question of *why*. Robin Wood states that genre studies sets up false categories. He states that it is an approach that is

> riddled with hopeless contradictions and irresolvable tensions. The work that has been done so far on genre has tended to take the various genres as "given" and discrete, defining them in terms of motifs, iconography, conventions, and themes. What we need to ask, if genre theory is ever to be productive, is less what than why. (61)

Wood's statements are essential for understanding why genre studies is problematical for the serious analysis of film. For the purposes of my study, I cannot simply look at the film's surface and state what the plots and characters are. This is a reflectionist study that does not dig deeper to the cultural issues that are at work. While Graeme Turner admits that genre studies is "one of the most fruitful" approaches, it is also a "contentious approach in film scholarship" (9). Jonathan Bernstein, a film scholar whose study of teen film Timothy Shary dismisses as "uninsightful," (*Generation* 24) states that genre analysis "[shies] away from ideological issues" (6). It is just these ideological issues that are at stake in the films and have been ignored by genre studies. Wood goes on to state,

> One of the greatest obstacles to any fruitful theory of genre has been the tendency to treat the genres as discrete. An ideological approach might suggest why they can't be, however hard they may appear to try. At best, they represent different strategies for dealing with the same ideological tensions. (62)

Wood's statements spell out the need to include and incorporate ideology into any successful analysis of a genre. Integrating ideological and cultural issues into the analysis of films yields a better understanding of the film and what it may reveal about culture and society as a whole. I find the genre analysis approach to teens in film to be inconclusive, garnering only details through plot and character analysis with little to add about the cultural values at hand.

A second method to studying teens in films that has been widely employed is the socio-cultural approach. This type of analysis looks at films and how they reflect the culture in which they were produced, analyzing "particular trends in films as a reflection of cultural trends" (Jackson 3). In *Images of Children in American Film: A Socio-Cultural Analysis*, Kathy Merlock Jackson states that "movies have been studied as cultural artifacts, as mirrors of their culture— the social milieu of the filmmakers as well as the hopes, fears, values, and expectations of their viewers" (3). She goes on to state, "For the socio-cultural film scholar, films and the images in them are representative of the underlying beliefs of the people who make and view them" (Jackson 4). Graeme Turner at first agrees with her statements, saying "At the simplest level…connections can be implied between a film and social movements or between a film and contemporary events" (89). In this way, a socio-cultural approach to analyzing film has its advantages. "Film is seen as a 'reflection' of the dominant beliefs and values of a culture" (Turner 152). In addition to analyzing the plots, characters, and overall content of the films, like genre analysis, this approach examines the films on a deeper level. By making connections and inferring relationships to the culture and history during which the films are made, this method gives us a more thorough investigation of the films being studied.

Turner admits, "It is possible to apprehend social change through changes in thematic or formal trends in narrative over time" (89).

On the other hand, Jackson uses the word "reflection," suggesting the idea of the films mirroring the periods from which they were produced. It is in these words and in her implication of the films reflecting the reality of the time that the flaws of the socio-cultural approach to studying films are revealed. While Jackson claims that there is much to say about the culture that produced the films, she works only at the surface layer of the films. Turner states that "analyses [that] have focused on the relations between film and trends within popular culture or have used film as documentary evidence of movements within social history…have assumed a 'reflectionist' relationship between film and society" (152). Calling this method of study "too primitive" and "unsatisfactory" (Turner 152), he explains,

> The metaphor of reflection…bypasses the process of selection and combination that goes into the composition of [film]. Between society and this so-called mirror is interposed a whole set of competing and conflicting cultural, subcultural, industrial, and institutional determinants…Film does not reflect or even record reality; like any other medium of representation it constructs and 're-presents' its pictures of reality by way of the codes, conventions, myths, and ideologies of its culture…Just as film works on the meaning systems of culture, it is also produced by those meaning systems. (152)

Turner's explanation clearly spells out the reasons why the socio-cultural approach cannot be used for my study of teens in film. The reflectionist method is insufficient, making the assumption that representations in film may be indicative of the society on the

whole. Assuming too much about the culture and history studied and answering too few questions about what the films are really revealing about the times in which they were produced, the socio-cultural approach is a dated method that will not be sufficient for the type of analysis that I wish to perform on teens in film.

Reception studies is also a method of analysis that has been used for studying teens in film. Also termed "audience response analysis," this approach details the relationship between the viewer and the film. Philip Green states, "Audience response analysis in the field of visual culture focuses on the interactions between texts and concrete spectators" (5). Georganne Scheiner, a scholar who uses reception studies as the method to understanding female adolescence in films before 1950, affirms that this approach allows an understanding of the culture of the time. She maintains that the "ideas show how cultural and historical conditions create a context in which films with particular themes or character types predominate, how films influence society, and how girls respond to both society and film" (Scheiner 3). Scheiner's argument connects the genre and sociocultural methods of study to an analysis of spectatorship and the reception of films. She is "interested in the way lived experiences and cultural practices are connected to cultural texts" (Scheiner 4). James B. Gilbert, author of *A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s,* uses historical and audience response analysis as his approach to understanding the juvenile delinquent characters in films and their place in history. He states "how changes in mass culture after WWII engaged the fears and energies of individuals…[The] interconnection of ideas, individuals, and institutions…reveal a profound response to an important problem

in American culture" (Gilbert 10). He uses this method to draw conclusions and theorize about what is revealed about his topic.

The works of James B. Gilbert and Georganne Scheiner are examples of the advantages of reception studies. Using audience response analysis, reception studies is able to determine how a film is received by a group of spectators during a specific period in time. Scheiner believes that using this method (in her study on adolescence) "provides us with a window into the cultural meanings of adolescents and how those meanings changed over time" (2). This method places the films in their historical context, details viewers' reactions to the films, and shows how the responses may have changed over time. On the other hand, a "focus on spectatorship can lead us up a blind alley" (Green 5). Philip Green maintains, "There is no direct route from what a communicative expression says to what a reader or viewer sees or hears, and so we can never safely infer either from the other" (6). While reception studies does appear to be very helpful in placing a film in its historical context and understanding its place in society, the use of audience reception analysis, as detailed by Green, has its flaws. He goes on to write, "In contrast to ideological analysis, it plays a pivotal role when we wish to engage the problem of spectatorship" (Green 6). His statements demonstrate why I do not want to employ audience response analysis as my method of study. While this approach is, like the other methods, helpful in studying the films, it focuses on spectatorship rather than the films themselves. I wish to focus on ideological analysis.

When defining ideology, Graeme Turner affirms,

> Implicit in every culture is a theory of reality which motivates ordering
> of that reality…For [it] to work…it needs to be unspoken, invisible.

> Ideology is the term used to describe the system of beliefs and practices that is produced by this theory of reality; and although ideology itself has no material form, we can see its material effects in all social and political formations, from class structure to gender relations to our idea of what constitutes an individual. (155)

In *Cracks in the Pedestal: Ideology and Gender in Hollywood*, Philip Green states that "ideology is the ensemble of beliefs and practices that support a (partially) fictitious sense of community among members of any organized human group" (15). Louis Althusser claims that ideology "represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (162). These definitions reveal the "imagined," "invisible" relationship of people to the cultures in which they live. These systems of belief, because of the unconscious nature of their existence, are not easily seen, understood, or recognized. Stuart Hall states, "its very taken-for-grantedness is what establishes it as a medium in which its own premises and presuppositions are being rendered invisible by its apparent transparency" (Hall quoted in Hebdige 11). While it would seem as though this kind of approach to film would be challenging due to the "invisibility" of ideology, this form of analysis has been widely performed. Turner states that the "competing and conflicting classes and interests [that] compose the culture's ideological system" can be reflected in "narratives [that] set up binary oppositions…composed of representations of competing ideological positions" (155). He goes on to assert,

> If our narratives do work to resolve social contradictions symbolically, what they must deal with are those existing political divisions or

inequities between groups, classes, or genders which have been constructed as

natural or inevitable within our societies. Films, then, both as systems of

representation and as narrative structures, are rich sites for ideological analysis.

(155)

Using ideological analysis as a method of approaching film is the most fruitful in

uncovering the relationship between the films and the cultures that produced them. The

idea of "contradictions" within the narratives' representation of the world is an issue that

Philip Green discusses as well. He states, "Ideological narratives treat the imaginary

world of social harmony as though it really were the natural and normal world, without

acknowledging their own function of defining what is "normal" and "natural" within that

world" (Green 23). He narrows his discussion to American cinema, observing, "The

primary characteristic of the Hollywood style is that the commodities of dominant visual

culture appear before us as objective evidences of the world, rather than as subjectively

authored interpretations of it" (Green 17). From both Turner and Green, it can be said

that films certainly represent contradicting interpretations of the world which produced

them. Determining what is truly being revealed about the culture at hand is precisely the

goal of ideological analysis.

How, though, are we able to look for what the film reveals about ideology?

Green states that "ideology is discoverable primarily by its absence" (16). Turner states

that the films are a kind of "battleground for competing and often contradictory

positions" (171). He continues,

> This competition usually results in a victory for the culture's dominant
>
> positions, but not without leaving cracks…through which we can see

> the consensualizing work of ideology exposed. Through such cracks,
>
> ideological analysis provides the point of entry to an understanding of the
>
> film's formal process of construction. (Turner 171)

Both authors realize the presence of ideology through its lack of a presence. It is found not on the surface level, but "further than one might expect into the construction of the text" (Turner 176). Ideology is not obvious, but it is discernible. "The ideology of a film does not take the form of direct statements or reflections of the culture"(Turner 176), as assumed by socio-cultural analysis. "It lies in the narrative structure and in the discourses employed – the images, myths, conventions, and visual styles" (Turner 173). This search for the ideology of the films will be the aim and purpose of my study.

Cultural studies is a method of study based in ideological analysis. Cultural studies examines "the ways by which social meanings are generated through culture – a society's way of life and system of values as revealed through such…forms and practices as television, radio, film, and music" (Turner 44). In *James Dean Transfigured: The Many Faces of Rebel Iconography*, Claudia Springer defines cultural studies as

> a form of inquiry which draws on other fields – anthropology, sociology,
>
> gender studies, feminism, literary criticism, history, and psychoanalysis among
>
> others – to discuss contemporary cultural practices. Although it draws on other
>
> fields, cultural studies also challenges them. Specifically, it challenges what has
>
> traditionally been studied. (6)

Turner states, "Accordingly, in order to better understand how film might be part of the cultural systems under analysis it became necessary to enquire more closely into film itself as a specific means of producing and reproducing cultural significance" (48).

While Stuart Hall contends that the "formal properties of media texts were organized in order to 'prefer' a way of being read" (Hall quoted in Turner 144), it can be said that there is more than one possible reading to a film. "Meanings are seen as the products of a reading rather than as an essential property of the film text itself" (Turner 144). Springer states, "In cultural studies, textual analysis is concerned less with a text's inherent value and more with its articulation of ideological positions in relation to dominant culture" (7). The cultural studies approach to film will be the manner in which I analyze the films included in my study. I will be examining their visual styles, construction, and other details in order to determine what is revealed about the culture of the 1950s and 1980s.

There are several advantages to taking a cultural studies approach to film. First, the "study of ideology in film provides an insight into the meaning systems of the culture" (Turner 177). Unlike socio-cultural analysis, which looks only at the surface layer of film to show what is reflected of the dominant culture, cultural studies delves deeper into the formulation of the films to uncover the ideological issues at work. Instead of viewing the films as mirrors of society, films are seen as sites of competing positions and interpretations of the culture at large. "More than any others, ideological considerations allow us to begin to understand the relationship between film texts and their cultural contexts" (Turner 171). Rather than looking only at the genre itself, the texts as a reflection of society, or how the film is received by the public, this approach, in the words of Thomas Doherty, "places the interrogative "Why?" before "What?" [with] the overriding advantage [being that] it can actually be answered with a degree of certainty" (12).

Several successful studies have been performed in other fields using the cultural studies approach. British cultural studies scholars have produced a great deal of scholarship on film, music, and literature. For instance, in *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock and Roll*, Simon Frith uses this approach in his extensive investigation into the history of rock and roll music. He analyzes the phenomenon on a deeper level, stating that we can "make sense of production and consumption on the basis of what is at stake in these processes – the *meanings* that are produced and consumed" (Frith 11). Just as Turner describes, Frith examines his medium on its deepest levels of construction rather than just taking it at face value. He "attempts to unpack the contradictions inherent in youth's commodity-oriented culture" (Frith quoted in Lewis *Road to Ruin* 6). In addition, in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige uses a cultural studies approach in his examination of the styles of various youth subcultures. He states that his goal is to "tease out the meanings embedded in the various post-war youth styles" (3). Hebdige states,

> Youth's appropriation of and to an extent its appropriation by material
> culture reveals a dramatic "refusal," a stylized repudiation of adult culture that
> "in spectacular fashion (signals) the breakdown in consensus in the post-war
> period. In its rituals and practices, its spectacular style, youth engages an
> ongoing cycle of resistance and de-fusion, autonomy and incorporation, diversity
> and fidelity, exile and assimilation." (167)

Hebdige investigates how the styles and appearances of various youth subcultures, such as mods, punks, and hipsters, resist the dominant adult culture. Instead of simply describing the styles of these subcultures or stating how they reflect the dominant culture,

Hebdige delves even deeper and finds the meanings behind them. He ultimately contends that "youth's recourse to the materials and materiality of style… (i.e., its encoded representations of opposition in and through material culture) evinces a "symbolic violation of the social order, a serious challenge to cultural hegemony" (Hebdige quoted in Lewis *Road to Ruin* 78). Both Frith and Hebdige use cultural studies approaches for their respective studies, looking for contradictions to expose ideology.

Similarly, Jon Lewis uses cultural studies for his investigation of the teen film and youth cultures. In *The Road to Romance and Ruin: Teen Films and Youth Culture*, Lewis draws from a large range of teen films from the 1950s to the early 1990s to examine the representations of youth. The goal of his study is to "attend to how the teen films narrativize…the otherwise chaotic and contradictory experience of youth" (Lewis 2). His "specific interest" is "how youth culture and the films that represent it speak to the central issues of post-World War II society" (Lewis 2). Dividing the book into six "corresponding" chapters, Lewis claims that "youth's resort to anomie, deviance, promiscuity and sexual experimentation, conspicuous consumption, rebellion, and regression…finds expression in American teen movies" (2-3). While Lewis realizes that the vast majority of the information pertaining to the teen film reveals the "rejection of the convention of authority," he feels differently, stating that "the teen film has rather enthusiastically negotiated the reverse" (3). His thesis is that "by and large, the teen film presides over the eventual discovery of viable and often traditional forms of authority…in effect, the restoration of the adult culture informed rather than radicalized by youth" (Lewis 3). Citing numerous examples from *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) to *Heathers*

(1989), Lewis maintains that despite previous studies and theories, the films reveal the youth culture's need and desire for traditional forms of authority.

Overall, Jon Lewis's study is the closest to the way in which I would like mine to be constructed. Drawing from cultural studies, Lewis goes beyond giving content analyses, historical backgrounds, and sociological explanations. He draws from numerous theorists and areas of study to explain his conclusions and provides ample evidence from the multiple teen films referenced. He also explores the underlying issues of the decades from which the films emerged, revealing the ideologies that are at work within the films. While his study is indeed thought-provoking and interesting, it all rests on proving how the films are about the youth culture's necessity for authority. My study will focus more on what the films have to say about the times in which they were produced and how ideological issues are revealed and imbedded within the films. I would also like to discover what the representation of teens in films has to say about the construction of gender in relation to adolescence and the developing adult identities that are portrayed onscreen. While I have found Lewis' study to be incredibly helpful, there has been some criticism of his work. Timothy Shary claims that "much of what Lewis has to say about young people is recycled from notions that are two or three generations past" and "his argument seems exaggerated" (84). He goes on to state that Lewis's "opinions are too often founded on inaccurate assumptions and ultimately do little to uncover specifically the popular media's representation of teenagers" (Shary 87). While Shary does make several important points in his review of Lewis's study, I do not completely agree with his critique. Most of Lewis's study was very helpful and informative in revealing information about the culture of the teen films and about

adolescence itself. Because of this, I have used Lewis's text and method of approach as a kind of model to reference.

In *James Dean Transfigured: The Many Faces of Rebel Iconography*, Claudia Springer analyzes rebel iconography. An example of one of the most complete and accurate analyses using a cultural studies approach, Springer discusses many facets of the rebel icon and why it is a complicated area of study. She states "The rebel is a particularly ambiguous icon, with meanings that contradict each other and an extraordinary ability to conform to any purpose" (Springer 1). Hers is a "study of a variety of texts from the United States that use the teen rebel icon in disparate ways," revealing "complexities and contradictions" and "constantly shifting allegiances" (Springer 2-3). Using her text for information and insight, I hope to replicate Springer's achievement, an effective example of using cultural studies, in my comparative study of *Rebel without a Cause* and *River's Edge*.

Rebel without a Cause is a film from the 1950s about a teen who feels alienated from those around him. Desperate to grow up so he won't need to endure the hardships of changing identity, Jim Stark (James Dean) wrestles through several days of extreme challenges to his masculinity. Meeting Judy (Natalie Wood) and Plato (Sal Mineo) only further confuses and complicates Jim. He is immediately drawn to both characters, a sign that his sexuality is definitely in question. After Jim's attempts to befriend the "Kids," a gang of so-called tough guys and their female cohorts, Buzz (Corey Allen), the gang's leader, challenges Jim to perform in a drag race. Torn over whether or not to prove his masculinity at the "chickie run," Jim asks his father, Frank (Jim Backus), for advice, only to be disappointed in his father's lack of support and understanding. When Buzz is

accidentally killed, Jim, Judy, and Plato escape to a mansion and act as a fantasy family. The scene later leads to Plato's death. While the film's overt message is one of conformity and adhering to a traditional norms of the 1950s, including that of the suburban, nuclear family which reinforces heterosexual unions, the film also contains veiled messages about sexuality and masculinity, offering different readings of the relationships between the characters and suggesting contradictory and varying degrees of masculinity than those that have been suggested.

With a collision of competing messages concerning adolescence and gender, *Rebel* reveals the conflicting ideologies of the decade. Among the characters Jim, Plato, Frank, and Buzz, there exists conflicting representations of masculinity and the veiled presence of homosocial bonds. The portrayal of female characters in the film contrasts the emasculating, sexuality-less Mrs. Stark (Ann Doran) against the extremely feminine and sexualized Judy. The film portrays juvenile delinquency as a problem that all teenagers face and all parents must endure. While the overt message of the film states that the solution is the reconciliation of the nuclear family, "the motivation for the happy ending fails to convince," according to film scholar Jackie Byars, "revealing contradictions in the ideological problematic the ending seeks to reinforce" (107).

In *Rebel without a Cause*, there exists a masculinity crisis among the four main male characters: Buzz, Jim, Plato, and Frank. First, by looking at the surface layer of *Rebel*, one might assume that the character of Plato is simply a small, lonely, and sad young man. Being a loner could be the case for any teenager in high school, but there is something else about Plato that adds to his outsider position: his deviation from conventional norms of masculinity. According to Marie Cartier, "Plato represents the

effeminate man" (453). Analyzing elements from Plato's stance to his interactions with Jim and from much of the dialogue in the film, we can see that there is what Christopher Castiglia terms an "implied homosexuality" (209) in his portrayal, or, in the least, a very different form of masculinity.

We are first introduced to Plato in the police station. When he is being questioned by the juvenile officer and his maid assures him, "he's gonna help you," Plato responds hopelessly, "No one can help me." One can only assume that the filmmakers intended the 1950s audience to interpret the statement as a reference to his lonely life and not subliminally as an expression of his sadness and confusion over his incurable disease: homosexuality. On Jim's first day of school, Plato runs to his locker to check his appearance in a mirror taped inside the locker's door. Near the mirror is a photo of Alan Ladd. This implies several meanings about Plato's identity. The use of mirrors in film has often suggested the notion of a fractured identity or a signal for a *doppelganger*. This could signify that Plato is leading a double life, trying to conform to the norms of 1950s masculinity and heterosexuality on the one hand, while secretly having homosexual urges on the other. Having Alan Ladd's picture in his locker could very well mean that Plato looks at the actor as an example of masculinity that he wishes to follow and a model to look up to. The pin-up of the male movie star, however, could also suggest a desire for Ladd, or someone to try to copy to *appear* masculine. The suggestion of homosexual attraction is also displayed through Plato's looking at Jim's reflection in the locker's mirror. Claudia Springer similarly suggests that "their scenes together [can be read] as contradicting, or at least weakening, the film's surface demand for aggressive, dominating men" (41).

Evidence of Plato's homosexual attraction to Jim continues throughout the film. During the planetarium scene, when Jim looks up at the stars projected on the ceiling and exclaims, "Boy!" Plato suddenly jumps up from the seats behind him, touches Jim's shoulder excitedly, and asks "What?" Plato only pays attention to the curator's lecture when *Jim* finds something interesting and calls out "Boy!" In addition, when the Kids begin to harass Jim, and Buzz threatens him with a knife, it is Plato who tries to help Jim escape. We can see how small and weak Plato is, however, when his attempts to protect Jim prove ineffective. He is easily held back, crying out "Jim!" as he is restrained by the larger teenage boys, the more acceptable examples of tough masculinity. Plato's homosexual bonds to Jim are also revealed in this scene's cinematography. In a shot that displays the onlookers' reactions to the boys' fighting, Plato and Judy are placed together in the frame. This placement of the two together suggests their similar feelings of desire for Jim, which further reinforces Plato's growing infatuation with him. This framing technique that places Judy and Plato together also occurs during the film's chickie run scene.

During the chickie run, Plato fabricates details about Jim's life to Judy, detailing an imagined intimacy that they have, going so far as to give him the nickname "Jamie." Plato says that Jim lets someone call him that only "if he really likes you." After Plato crosses his fingers, closes his eyes, and prays for Jim's safety during the chickie run, Jim gives him a ride to his house. At this point, according to Castiglia, Plato "becomes more and more solicitous of Jim's attention, to the point of obsession, even inviting Jim to spend the night at his place" (209). Plato asks him, "You wanna come home with me? I mean, there's nobody at my house." Jim responds, "Are you flipped or something?"

Clearly, Jim has a problem with Plato's attachment to him. Whether it is his apparent homosexuality or at least his lack of conventional masculinity, Plato's connection to Jim confuses the latter and makes him further question "what it takes to be a man." Shots of Plato's pink and gold, ornately-decorated and frilly bedroom shortly after this scene do not help the viewer's attempts to see Plato as masculine. In 1950s America there was a clear link in the dominant culture between effeminacy and homosexuality. While this link has been rightly challenged in our own era, in the era in which the film was made, effeminacy functioned as a kind of shorthand to viewers for homosexuality. Castiglia asserts that "the examination of sexual identity is intrinsically connected to a 'regime of the norm'…the traditional domesticity of white, middle-class suburbia" (208). He then calls for a "[move] into the private and domestic space on which the very identity of the liberal subjects depends" (Castiglia 208). If this is the case, then we can certainly visually attribute the color pink in Plato's bedroom, most often associated with girls, to Plato's identity, which can then be seen as more effeminate and, in terms of 1950s cultural consciousness, implied homosexuality.

The scene at the mansion provides the final evidence of Plato's femininity and thus his connection in 1950s cultural consciousness to homosexuality. As Judy, Jim, and Plato play-act and assume the roles of a couple and realtor, it is no surprise that Jim and Judy are the fictional heterosexual pair and Plato is the outcast. When Jim explains, "You see, we're newlyweds" to Plato, he has to tap Plato's elbow to prove to the momentarily frowning Plato that he is only pretending. Jim needs to reassure Plato that he is only *pretending* to be involved in a heterosexual relationship with Judy. Later, the film places Jim, Judy, and Plato in an interesting position. Jim lies on Judy's lap,

showing his affection for her. Plato follows suit immediately after and lies against Jim's

arm. Plato mirrors Jim's display of affection for Judy to prove the same thing to Jim,

stating "I wish we could stay here forever." His ultimate display of weakness comes,

however, when he is chased by the Kids and later killed by the police. Even with a gun

in his hand, Plato proves powerless, weak, and afraid. He screams, "Save me!" and

"Why did you leave me alone?" to Jim. When Jim finally manages to calm him down,

after straddling him, he gives Plato his red jacket. After hugging and smelling it, Plato

puts it on, seeing it as either a token of love from Jim or simply as something to show that

he can be tough like Jim. He emerges from the planetarium only to be killed by the

police.

Similar to Plato's effeminate manner and veiled homosexuality is Jim's father,

Frank Stark. According to Christopher Castiglia, "The problem with Mr. Stark is that he

– like the father of countless sissies in American film – doesn't wear the pants in the

family, letting his wife and mother walk all over him" (209). Jim's "hen-pecked" (Byars

126) father shows from the start of the film that he is not a "strong paternal/masculine

principle" (Reynolds 6) for Jim to identify with. When Frank tries to equate Jim's

drunkenness with all teenagers and even himself by saying, "I cut loose pretty good in my

day too," his wife degrades him by saying, "Oh really Frank? When was that?" He

quickly hushes back to her, "Can't you wait 'til we get home?" Similarly, when Jim

ignores what he says, Frank yells, "You slam the door in my face!" He receives no

respect from anyone, not from his wife nor from Jim. But how can Jim see his father as a

strong model of masculinity when the women in the family "make mush out of him"?

After Jim's encounter with Buzz, he returns home to find his apron-clad father on his hands and knees, rushing to pick up food he was to deliver to wife before she wakes up. Jim says "Let her see it," and, trying to force his father to assert himself and his masculinity, he pulls his father up to his knees and says, "Dad. Stand. Don't…I mean you shouldn't…Don't," only to have his father return to his frantic cleaning up of the mess, "much to Jim's disgust at this inversion of the gender roles" (Lewis "1955" 141). Later, when Jim asks him, "What do you have to do when you have to be a man?" Frank, still dressed in the emasculating apron, stutters, "Well…now…" and has to really think about a response. When Jim demands, "No, you give me a direct answer," Frank can't. When Jim asks the question again after the chickie run, demanding that he "stand up for [him]," he cannot take his father's submissiveness to his mother and effeminate nature and longer. "Frustrated, Jim grabs his father by his shoulders and throws him across the room…He does not want to kill his father…He just wants to knock some sense into him" (Lewis "1955" 147). He is a "vacillating, emasculated patriarch in a matriarchal world… [who] fails miserably" (Lewis "1955" 152). He does, however, "sympathize with Jim's rejection of adulthood because he understands that adulthood for men in America in [the fifties] is a nightmare" (Lewis "1955" 152).

Frank's frustration and confusion over how to respond to Jim's question is evident by his lack of an answer. He doesn't know how to fulfill conventional definitions of masculinity. Jon Lewis states that

> Frank Stark was like a lot of men of his generation. He thought that marriage alone would make him a man. He believed that…any reluctance to

commit was a sure sign of weakness. What he didn't know was that married life

would have its own design for emasculation. ("1955" 147)

During a time when "masculinity seemed so tied to marriage, was there any way to break

with the breadwinner role and still hold onto one's manhood? Frank poses: was there any

way to hold onto your masculinity in a suburban marriage" (Lewis "Growing Up Male"

98). Frank's life is ruled so much by his wife and marriage that he has no way to assert

any form of authority. His masculinity is masked by his wife's overbearing manner (and

also by the apron that he dons). Jim himself sees his father as "overly domesticated,

where he should be rugged and self-reliant" (Lewis "1955" 139). "A conformist at work

and at home, [Frank's] failure to provide an adequate role model for his son, his failure to

establish and maintain limits and to assert his authority…is the logical extension of his

failure as a man" (Lewis *Road to Ruin* 22). Frank cannot produce an acceptable model of

masculinity for Jim to follow because he himself is unsure of how to appear masculine.

He had always assumed, like other males-in-crisis during the 1950s, that marriage in

itself would prove his masculinity.

It isn't until the very end of the film, after Plato dies, that Frank is able to assert

his masculinity. Throughout most of the film, "Frank is a sad excuse for a man" but,

according to Jon Lewis, "in the end, he takes charge, having narrowly escaped the most

unthinkable of consequences for his indecision and cowardice, the death of a child"

("Growing Up Male" 95). Undoubtedly, it is Frank's shock over the realization that Jim

had almost died that wakes him to the error of his ways. His weakness transforms to

strength as he realizes the role that he must now take on. When Jim stands over Plato's

body, Frank says, "You can't help it, son. You did everything a man could." Hearing

these words signals such a change in Frank that Jim curls into a ball at his father's feet. (I

only wonder as to whether Jim's reaction is out of grief over Plato's death or an

overwhelming feeling of reassurance that his father has finally proved his masculinity.)

Frank then instructs Jim, "Stand up. I'll stand up with you and I'll try to be as strong as

you want me to be." This seems to appease Jim and even his mother as she sees the

change in Frank, finally shutting her mouth when Frank stops her.

The central character in the film, Jim Stark, displays an even more complicated

portrayal of masculinity. From the very onset of the film, Jim doesn't seem to be much

of a strong, tough guy. He first appears lying drunkenly in the street, "[curled] up in a

fetal position, [tucking] a wind-up monkey toy under a newspaper blanket" (Springer 33).

Acting more feminine than masculine, more maternal than paternal, Jim tenderly tucks in

the toy as a mother would her child. Once he is taken into the police station, it is obvious

that he too is confused about his place in the world, particularly his position as a "man" in

the world. As Jim's parents bicker back and forth and ignore his plight and confusion

about his masculinity and impending adulthood, he cries out in anguish, "You're tearing

me apart!" But is he crying out to his parents or to the1950s culture at large? Jim

"acknowledges not only his own gender conflict and subsequent angst with his life, but,

more importantly, a greater conflict and angst felt amongst white males in the

suburbanized world of mid-twentieth-century America" (Mitchell 133). Jim, like many

men who were experiencing a masculinity crisis during the 1950s, is tormented by how to

act like a man. Though conventional norms of society stated that successful models of

masculinity were married, suburban breadwinners, Jim sees his father, who fits the 1950s

model of masculinity perfectly, as a poor example to follow. Jim "feels torn between the

dissatisfaction he feels surrounding his father's model of masculinity, which leads him to rebel, and his wish to conform to an expression of authentic masculinity" (Mitchell 134). These feelings of confusion expressed by Jim throughout the film are precisely what add to his already existing outsider status as the new kid. Because of this, Jon Lewis refers to him as a representation of alienated youth, "an anomic teen" (Lewis "1955" 152). Jim is an outsider, a rebel, not only because he is the new kid in school, but also because he is so insecure and confused by his position as a man.

There are moments in *Rebel* in which Jim appears to evoke a more traditional, tough form of masculinity. He threatens the Kids with a crowbar and is later able to endure the cut of a blade during a knife fight with Buzz; he survives the chickie run; he is able to overpower his father, taking him by his shoulders and hurling him to the floor. He even goes so far as to contradict his parents, wanting to admit his involvement in the chickie run because "he knows enough about being a man to want to stand his ground and fight" (Lewis "Growing Up Male" 95). These moments in the film, however, are undermined by Jim's unwavering refusal to be called and proved a "chicken." It seems that any time he is suspected to be "a chicken," he needs to find a way to prove his masculinity. Is he, however, proving that he is indeed a conventionally masculine man, or is he trying to appear tough and more conventionally masculine to conform to how the other teenagers and men behave, how he *should* act?

Portraying a form of masculinity that reveals "sensitivity and open expression[s] of tenderness" it is apparent that Jim is not as strong an example of "iron-clad male solidity" (Springer 33) as he would hope. His sensitivity, confusion, and tenderness are displayed multiple times in the film. He reveals to the juvenile officer, Ray, "If I had just

one day when I didn't have to be all confused," and continues with a line that most critics have ignored, "[when] I didn't have to feel ashamed of everything. If I felt that I belonged someplace…You know?" Jim is not only confused by who he is; he is "ashamed" by his ambiguous gender identity and by his place as a "man" in society. When Jim comes home late one evening, he sits upside-down on the couch. As his mother "descends the stairs in a point-of-view shot (Jim's), she is upside down (because he is) – a visual marker of the world turned on its head" (Lewis "Growing Up Male" 96). The reversal of Jim's point-of-view could also indicate to the audience his reversed form of masculinity and sexuality, his effeminate mannerisms and homosexual tensions with Plato. He is confused because he sees the world differently from others. His first day of school, he has to look at the word "BOYS" above the restroom door, to ensure that he is going into the "correct" gender-assigned area. His confusion over and attempts not to appear "chicken" are deemed worthless, however, after the chickie run scene. Jim says, "I didn't chicken. You saw where I jumped." Judy replies, "It doesn't matter to them."

What contributes to the notion of Jim having a more softened, effeminate form of masculinity are his interactions with Plato, Judy, and most interestingly to me, Buzz. His homosocial bonds with Buzz and Plato and his somewhat blasé attitude toward Judy's advances all indicate a crack in Jim's heterosexual tough guy veneer. First, Jim's interactions with Judy suggest a possible heterosexual romance between the two of them. While it is obvious that Jim is confused about his sexual identity, it can be said that he does have intimate feelings for Judy. When he sees her leave behind her compact in the police station, Jim picks it up and keeps it. By bringing it to the chickie run, Jim pretends that Judy's kisses for Buzz are what her compact symbolizes to him: a token of affection.

Jim also lies on Judy's lap and accepts her kisses, willing even to "explore" the mansion with her. The very ending of the film solidifies the notion of 1950s conformity and has "contained or discredited the rebel's resistance" (Springer 30) as Jim is paired off with Judy. In a film, according to Jon Lewis, "about a rebel conforming to some sort of family ideal, or ideal family" (*Road to Ruin* 28), we can see Jim finally taking on the masculine role through his play-acting at the mansion with Judy and Plato (neither he nor Plato adopts the role of the wife/lover), and by his choice at the end of the film to, seemingly, stay with Judy, a sign of a heterosexual union.

Jim's already questionable masculinity and heterosexuality are further complicated by his "friendship" with Plato. Quoting from *Culture Clash: the Making of a Gay Sensibility*, Marie Cartier states, "The homosexual subtext is clear through the film" (446). Referred to by Judy as a "disease," having "soft" lips, and being "gentle," Jim is already pin-pointed as being effeminate and thus, in 1950s terms, homosexual. Jim, like a mother nurturing her son, exudes a great deal of tenderness toward Plato. He frequently touches Plato's hair and arms and offers his jacket to Plato at the beginning and end of the film. Judy tells Jim that "being Plato's friend when nobody else liked him – that's being strong." She sees his wanting to be the friend of Plato, an outsider, as a sign of strength, but perhaps he was the only one who wanted to be Plato's friend because he *liked* Plato and is *like* Plato, possibly homosexual. Jim even says directly to Plato, "You're my friend…That means a lot to me." It is clear that Jim is not as enthusiastic about Judy as she is about him when she expresses her love to him. She tells him, "I love somebody. And it's so easy…I love you Jim. I really mean it." He answers back, "Well,

I'm glad." Not only do Jim's eyes look toward the ceiling nervously as Judy professes her heterosexual love for him, but Jim never says "I love you" back to her.

What is most interesting in *Rebel without a Cause* regarding the portrayal of masculinity and Jim's questionable heterosexuality is the representation of Buzz, a subject that has received very limited critical attention. Throughout the film, as it has been repeatedly stated in critical literature pertaining to the film, Buzz is the representation of the more traditional ideals pertaining to masculinity. He is the tough guy: violent, jealous, and ready for action. He has a girlfriend, Judy, and is the leader of a gang, the Kids. Just like any other teenage boy, however, Buzz too reveals his uncertainties and a veiled homosexual tension through his exchanges with Jim. While Andrew Geoff contends that "Buzz's response to adolescent confusion is to indulge in any form of action, however (self-)destructive," I believe that Buzz is also reacting to his homosexual urges. When he first sees Jim, Buzz asks, "What's that?" immediately depersonalizing Jim. But does he see Jim as a threat to his relationship with Judy or as an appeal to his possible homosexuality? When Jim attempts to win over the Kids by impersonating a bull in the conservatory, one of the Kids says, "A comedian, Buzz" to which Buzz responds, "Yeah, he's cute." While the Kids hover around Jim's car before the boys are to fight, Buzz reveals his phallic-like pocket knife and stabs Jim's car tire. Just as the tire deflates, there is a cut to a shot of Jim, physically shrinking and lowering his body at the same time, symbolizing a kind of connection between the knife/tire and Buzz/Jim. Buzz then says to the Kids, "He's real abstract…He's different" only to be reminded by Jim, "That's right…I'm cute too." As the two boys are moved closer (visually) together and Jim is urged by Buzz to pick up the knife to fight, Jim says, "I

thought only punks used knives." Using the word "punk," "which was slang for gay" (Springer 33), Jim insinuates Buzz's possible homosexuality. Roused (or aroused) by this comment, Buzz makes the Kids give Jim a knife and the fighting ensues.

When the two boys meet for the chickie run, Buzz suddenly decides to be polite to Jim. He and Jim introduce themselves and Buzz extends his hand over his shoulder to shake Jim's. The first sign of physical contact between the two boys motivates Buzz to say, "You know something? I like you. You know that?" He is not speaking to Judy, but to Jim. The homosexual tension in the scene is also evident through the two boy's shared cigarette. When Jim takes out a cigarette to smoke, Buzz looks over, takes it out of Jim's mouth and places it in his mouth. Jim does not respond angrily, but smiles. Taking back his cigarette and confused by the air of tough masculinity that they are trying to evoke, Jim asks Buzz, "Why do we do this?" Buzz responds, "You gotta do something, now, don't you?" While most critics have taken this statement to be a symbol of the teens' need to rebel against something, I find it to mean that they need to "do something" about their homosexual urges, finding ways to mask it by proving themselves to have a "steely-hard masculinity" (Springer 33).

From the analysis of *Rebel without a Cause*, it is clear that there are varying degrees of masculinity in the film. From the feminized Plato to the effeminate Frank to sensitive, confused Jim to the supposedly hyper-masculine Buzz, it is obvious that there is more than one model of masculinity. While the culture of the 1950s would assert that there is only one kind of masculinity to follow, *Rebel* reveals the opposite. Also, although homosexuality was illegal during the 1950s, it certainly did exist and is hinted at in the portrayal of the sexual tension between Jim and Plato. *Rebel Without a Cause*, as a

quintessential example of a 1950s film, is made even more important because of its

contradictory messages about masculinity and gender. Being so popular and mainstream,

it is amazing that the messages of the film did not permeate even further into the minds of

the 1950s audience, for they would have found "not only evidence of the

conformism…and emasculation that had so bankrupted the culture of their elders," states

Jon Lewis in "1955: Movies and Growing Up…Absurd," "but a wealth of trenchant

political criticism and, yes, profound film expressions of teen anomie, of sexual

repression, unstable gender roles, and of failing adult institutions that revealed the failure

of the postwar culture" (153). Perhaps if the veiled messages within the film's subtext

could have been more overt, society at large would have been more accepting of the

different models of masculinity and sexuality that the film had to offer. This, however,

was unfortunately not so and is shown through an analysis of *River's Edge*.

River's Edge is a film from the 1980s that, like *Rebel without a Cause*, offers

differing models of masculinity and ideological content about sexuality. Unlike *Rebel*,

however, *River's Edge* has not garnered such critical attention. Apart from Jon Lewis,

there is a major lack of scholarship on the film. Even a scholar like Timothy Shary, who

is a self-proclaimed expert on teen movies from the 1980s, fails to discuss the film.

Rarely even accorded a plot summary, *River's Edge* has been overlooked by scholars. As

a result, there are few references to critical literature pertaining to *River's Edge* within

my thesis. It is not the scholarship on *River's Edge* that I have neglected; it is the film

itself that has been neglected.

River's Edge, which according to Jon Lewis, "plays like an eighties remake of

Rebel without a Cause" (*Road to Ruin* 19), offers a very complex portrayal of gender and

sexuality. Released in 1986, the film, which is based on a true story, depicts how a group

of teenagers reacts to the murder of one of their friends. In the film, John (Daniel

Roebuck) kills his girlfriend, Jamie (Danyi Deats), only to brag about it and invite the

other teens to see the body. Over the course of the film, we see the teens' reactions to the

murder and their decisions regarding whether or not to tell the police.   As the film's

narrative progresses, there are many implications about gender and sexuality, particularly

about masculinity as it pertains to homosocial bonds and what Jim Stark refers to as

"what it takes to be a man."

The male characters in *River's Edge* are particularly interesting because they

present varying degrees of masculinity. Between John, the murderer, Lane (Crispin

Glover), his loyal protector and "sort-of leader of the clique" (Lewis *Road to Ruin* 14),

Matt (Keanu Reeves), the film's hero, and Feck (Dennis Hopper), the hippie drug-dealer

and friend of the boys, the male characters reveal their own notions about being

masculine. First, the film introduces us to John through the eyes of Tim (Joshua Miller),

Matt's delinquent younger brother. After dropping his sister's favorite doll off a bridge

into the river below, Tim looks through the bridge's railings and sees John screaming and

whooping loudly, all the while seated next to his dead girlfriend's naked body. After

yelling at a convenience store clerk who denies him an underage purchase of beer, John

clarifies his outlook on life stating, "I don't give a fuck about you, and I don't give a fuck

about your laws." He then walks into school late to meet his friends (he obviously

doesn't care about his education either) and tells them that he killed Jamie. While the

girls in the group don't believe John and dismiss him as "strange," the boys are intrigued

and follow John to the site of Jamie's body. Once the boys see her and realize that John

has in fact killed his girlfriend, Lane asks the obvious question: "Why did you kill her?"

In perfect tough-guy fashion, John explains, "She was talkin' shit." This is his only

explanation for killing her. According to Simon Reynolds and Joy Press, "The death of

motivation haunts *River's Edge*" (31). John has no reason to murder Jamie, but he

repeats throughout the film that killing her made him "feel so alive." His idea of being a

man revolves around being omnipotent, refusing to yield or surrender, and displaying his

toughness, mainly through violence.

It is through his conversations with Feck that John's real attitudes toward himself,

toward killing Jamie, and toward life itself are revealed. "The encounter between Feck

and John," states Simon Reynolds and Joy Press in *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion,*

and Rock'n'Roll, "becomes a dialogue between two very different ethics of murder, two

kinds of fucked-up masculinity…John is very '80s: his violence is…contextless, random,

and unmotivated" (30). The first conversation occurs at Feck's house, where Lane has

forced John to hide out. When Feck details to John how he *shot* his girlfriend but "was in

love," John smiles and says proudly, "I strangled mine." When Feck asks, "But did you

love her?" John shrugs and says, "She was okay." When John references Feck's female

companion Ellie, a blow-up doll, he asks, "Hey Feck, are you a psycho or something?"

Feck responds, "No, I'm normal. She's a doll. I know that. But you, you killed a girl.

Are *you* a psycho?" John states, "Yeah, probably. What other excuse do I have?" It is

clear from John's blasé attitude about Jamie's death that he had no real reason to kill her

and shows no kind of remorse for what he has done. His admission of being a "psycho"

proves that he knows that what he did was abnormal. He does not seem to care about life

in general, however, stating, "For me, if I get in a fight, I go crazy, like it's the end of the

world…and who cares if this guys wastes me, 'cause I'm gonna waste him first. I mean, the whole world's gonna blow up anyway; I might as well keep my pride." Not only do John's words reveal his "'why bother?' generation's" (Lewis *Road to Ruin* 14) apathetic, detached view on the world, but it also points to John's ideas about being a man. He states that he will "waste [a guy] first" and that he would rather "keep his pride" than back down. By proving his power over others, controlling people through violence, and believing himself to be the most dominant male, John reveals his hyper-masculine definition of what it means to be a man.

John's model of hyper-masculinity is evidenced especially during his final scenes with Feck. During a chance meeting with Matt at the same convenience store, John holds a gun to the clerk's head when the clerk refuses to sell beer to Matt after two in the morning. John asks, "This guy giving you trouble?...Well, I'm here to turn back the time," effectively allowing Matt to escape with beer. John's adaptation of a lone ranger-type attitude contributes to his belief that with violence and a tough attitude, he has power over everyone else. His notions of invincibility continue as he recklessly robs a nearby store to obtain bullets for Feck's gun. John and Feck then sit by the river and drink beers together, discussing their crimes and how they felt. When John performs lewd gestures using Ellie, however, Feck is disgusted and desperate for her, in his mind, not to be harmed or insulted. He yells out, "Please!" distracting John with his echo. After yelling out immature comments to produce an echo of his own, John shoots the gun into the sky, screeching out "Oh yeah?" after a neighbor threatens to call the police. John is obviously unafraid of any kind of punishment or consequences from authorities, feeling that he is all-powerful and in control of everything. He tells Feck, "I've killed a girl…I wanted to

show the world who's boss!" and adds disturbingly, "I didn't need no gun; I did mine

with my own hands." He then proceeds to describe the murder, recounting that he had

had "total control of her…It felt so real. She was dead right there in front of me" and

then he screams out toward the river, "and I felt so fucking alive!" When John asks Feck

if he had felt the same way when he killed his own girlfriend, Feck lets out a laugh and,

shaking his head, says, "Not quite, man."

Feck's reactions to John's behavior reveal just how bizarre John's notions of

power and hyper-masculinity have become. John repeatedly brags to both Feck and his

friends how he killed Jamie, showing that it was "total control" over women that he

sought. John clearly has an issue with women in power. For example, one could make

the argument that John *does* respect women through his care for his elderly aunt. I,

however, believe that John takes care of her because she is mentally ill, requesting that

John read her *Green Eggs and Ham*, a children's book. To John, she is just another

woman for him to have power over. Similarly, when Lane explains that John killed

Jamie because she was "shooting her mouth off" about his dead mother, a friend in the

group, Tony (Josh Richman), explains, "Yeah, he's got a couple of loose springs when it

comes to dealing with his dead mother." If John had stated that he felt alive in

comparison to Jamie's death, why couldn't he have felt that same way in reference to his

mother's death? John's complete command over Jamie and his ability to act out his

notions of being all-powerful by strangling her to death are what secured, in John's mind,

his dominance and position as an omnipotent male. It is through the use of violence and,

in particular, his control of women that John believes himself to be a supreme, hyper-

masculine being.

Although Feck can be viewed as an extension of John's model of masculinity, he is slightly different due to his more sensitive personality. Constantly referencing how he too "killed a girl once," usually to threaten Lane and the other boys, Feck explains that he can't leave the house because the police are "still looking" for him. Unlike John, however, Feck repeats over and over that he loved his girlfriend. "Feck is a relic from a more romantic era (the '60s); his crime is the result of a tragic excess of desire" (Reynolds and Press 30). After describing the murder to John, he states, "I was in love," his eyes widening and glowing at the word "love." Similarly, after refusing to shoot his gun for "sentimental" reasons, Feck tries to explain his crime to John: "I wanted to show her who was boss. I don't know if you can understand…I loved her!" Although it does not excuse his behavior, it is clear that Feck's crime was one of passion. He repeatedly speaks of loving his girlfriend and exhibits feelings of love toward his silent companion Ellie, a blow-up doll. It is Feck's treatment of Ellie in comparison to John's that signals the varying degrees of masculinity between the two characters.

What makes Feck so complex is his sensitivity which is demonstrated by the presence of Ellie. While he appears tough, waving his gun around and threatening violence repeatedly, Feck is not at all like John. His treatment of Ellie reveals that he does care for women. He plays the saxophone for her, dances with her, and defends her from John when he attempts to use the doll to imitate sexual acts. Feck stops him, explaining that "Ellie's a nice girl." John, however, objectifies Ellie as being only an open-mouthed sex blow-up doll, another female that he can dominate and force to do as he pleases. To Feck, however, Ellie is a real friend and he treats her with respect. What undermines Feck's behavior and mindset, unfortunately, is the fact that Ellie is indeed,

not human. Feck respects Ellie because she is a doll. She is a "woman" to him, but a

woman who cannot speak her mind. To him, Ellie represents an unspeaking, personality-

less version of the old girlfriend he had loved. As a result, she is that more endearing to

him because he won't have to "show her who is boss."

What also weakens the notion of Feck as sympathetic toward women is the fact

that he is portrayed in the film as insane. Not only is he having a relationship and

conversations with an inanimate bow-up doll, but he constantly brandishes his gun and

threatens the boys. Despite threats from Feck like "I could blow your brains out," Lane

says, "No time for bullshit" and bursts into his house. He and the other teens dismiss

Feck as crazy and just use him as their drug supplier, going along with his act to get what

they want. Though Feck too killed his girlfriend, he cites passion as part of his

reasoning. John's crime was fueled by a need to prove his power, and this shocks Feck.

"Feck's moral and aesthetic disgust for John's murder-without-narrative or 'soul' is the

most telling moment in the film. Moved to pity, he eventually shoots John to put him out

of his misery" (Reynolds and Press 31). After killing John, Feck states that there was "no

hope for him. He didn't love her. He didn't feel a thing. I at least loved her. I cared for

her. I don't like killing people, but sometimes it's necessary." Although the film

complicates Feck's heroism through its depiction of him as crazy and as a strange model

of masculinity, it is *he* who kills John. Stephen Tropiano states that John "touches a

nerve in Feck, who is disturbed by his fellow killer's lack of emotions" (211). Feck, the

more emotional, sensitive male is the character to defeat John, effectively defeating also

the notion of the seemingly all-powerful male that the disaffected John was trying to

represent.

River's Edge offers yet another model of masculinity that is represented in the character Matt. Seemingly unmoved, like John, by the figures of authority around him, Matt is forced to execute a model of masculinity that differs from the other male characters in the film: that of a father. Fluctuating between the roles of teenager and adult, Matt "reluctantly takes on the responsibility of surrogate father" (Lewis *Road to Ruin* 20) to his younger brother and sister. After his brother Tim tells their crying sister that it was he who drowned her beloved doll in the river, Matt is the one to punish him. He yells, "Stupid enough to pull a stunt like that; then to go and brag about it…" (It is ironic statements such as these that make the viewer wonder: why didn't Matt say those very words to John in the first place?) Matt attempts to parent the children, repeatedly attempting to discipline Tim for his frequent offenses and to nurture his little sister, going so far as to attend a funeral for her doll. I feel that it is Matt's unique position as a father, albeit a failing one, that motivates his sole attempt to alert the police. Jon Lewis states, "Overwhelmed by a pervasive alienation, [his] outsider status somehow signals [his] heroism" (*Road to Ruin* 20). It is Matt who is the sole member of the seven-person clique to "narc" on John. Matt represents the one character in the film that seems to have a clear sense of right and wrong, yet he is clearly troubled by his decision.

While Matt has what Jim Stark refers to as "what it takes to be a man," he is a reluctant hero. He does what the other male (and female) characters in the film are too morally weak to do, but he doesn't want anybody to know about it. When Clarissa (Ione Skye) realizes that it was Matt who told on John, he admits, "I didn't think I'd be the only one," and quickly adds, "Don't tell anybody." She agrees that she won't and admires him for his bravery and willingness to go against Lane. Although Matt did indeed do the right

thing, his "narc-ing" has left him very uneasy. The negative connation of the word

"narc," synonymous with tattletale, rat, snitch, and "dirty traitor" (which is how Tim now

refers to him), has left Matt feeling insecure about his place within the group and about

his status as a male.

What complicates Matt's masculinity even further are the contradictions revealed

in his representation. While he serves as the voice of reason within the group, he too

threatens and/or uses violence to prove himself. Although he has used forms of violence

in minor ways at the beginning of the film (mimicking his brother's voice, stealing his

gun back from his brother), Matt first demonstrates a string a violent acts when he returns

home after being held at the police station. When his mother's boyfriend, Jim (Leo

Rossi), comments on John and the murder, Matt at first plays dumb and asks, "They

haven't caught him yet?" (a statement that again reveals his hesitancy to admit that he

told on John and defied his friends). After Jim says that he "knows something's up" and

refers to Matt's reaction as "phony," Matt asks him why he should care when he is only

present in the house to use his mother financially and sexually. Their dispute then gets

physical, escalating so far that Matt picks up a bat and threatens Jim with it. Jim taunts

him, "Oh, tough guy, huh? Come on – show me how tough!" Now a matter of proving

his masculinity, Matt is ready to assault Jim. The two men are stopped, however, not by

a realization of the ridiculousness of the argument, but by their realization that Matt's

little sister, who runs out of the room, has been watching and listening all along.

Throwing up his arms, Matt yells an accusatory "Great!" aimed at Jim and runs out of the

room to console his sister. Seeing her crying, now because she has discovered that Tim

broke her handmade gravestone for her doll, Matt is infuriated. He chases Tim down,

pulls him off his bicycle, and beats him viciously with his fists, screaming "Why?" Stopped by Jim, Tim runs away, promising Matt that he'll "pay for what [he] did." Interestingly, when Jim is unable to hold Matt back any longer, he sighs and rubs his hands through his hair, just like Frank Stark does in *Rebel* after he is unable to provide an answer to Jim's haunting question. When Matt's mom asks exasperatingly, "You let them *both* get away?" (a dig at his masculinity), Jim excuses his failure to assert his dominance over the boys by saying, "I've got troubles of my own." It is obvious that virtually every male character in *River's Edge* has some sort of crisis involved with his masculinity.

Matt's random acts of violence and his position as a kind of father figure complicate our view of him as a model of masculinity. His use of violence is reminiscent of John's idea of omnipotence, yet Matt never thinks of himself as so and dismisses John as an "asshole." Matt's similarities to Feck's portrayal of a more sensitive model of masculinity are revealed through the compassion and love that he provides for his sister. Unlike Feck, however, Matt is not depicted as mentally unstable for acting in such a way. While he draws upon some aspects of the models of masculinity that are represented in the characters of Feck and John, Matt serves as the film's hero for a reason: he is not as flawed as the other two characters, commits no real wrongdoings, does not abuse women, and is the one to turn John in for his crime. Although he is the best model of masculinity and the most mature character that the film has to offer, Matt is often uncomfortable with doing the right thing, the acceptable thing, the manly thing. He represents, like Jim Stark in *Rebel Without a Cause*, a teenager who is confused by his impending manhood, questioning every decision he makes. Matt doubts his integrity and conscience, until he

ultimately makes the adult decision to notify the police and to explain to Lane that the "idea of helping John out is not a good thing." This analysis of Matt leads to an investigation of his polar opposite, the deranged, effeminate Lane.

Serving as a warped extension of all three models of masculinity, Lane represents one of the more complicated males in the story. What is most interesting to me about Lane is the contradiction that exists between his commitment to appear hyper-masculine and his veiled homosexuality. This contradiction is apparent just by looking at Lane when he first appears. He sports a black leather jacket, black pants, black driving gloves, and a black hat. The biker ensemble that he wears and the tough-guy image that he is hoping to evoke, however, is undermined by the fact that he appears to be wearing makeup. It is difficult to take Lane seriously as a potent example of hyper-masculinity with what appears to be eyeliner and rouge. His voice is a whiny blend of a California surfer dude and a valley girl, producing an annoying effect that is worsened by his exaggerated body language. He is constantly pounding on doors, slamming on the brakes, and punching his fists when he is frustrated. While these extreme violent outbursts may seem to him an extension of his toughness, it is truly a sign of immaturity and childishness that does not help in seeing him as a tough, potent model of masculinity. Even his walk, which looks like a woman who is trying to impersonate a man's swagger, weakens our notions of his tough masculinity. His overall physical appearance, androgynous voice, and tantrums all produce a persona that is more feminine than masculine.

Juxtaposed with his hyper-masculine facade is Lane's fanatical loyalty to his group of friends. Simon Reynolds and Joy Press's notion that "generational unity has

contracted to an amoral gang loyalty" (31) is very telling with reference to Lane. He is so

ferociously loyal and has such a strong allegiance to the group that he disregards the fact

that John has killed Jamie. Despite the fact that John has done something illegal, Lane

maintains the fact that they should protect him because he is one of their friends. Lane is

almost excited by the challenge to the group's fidelity. He states, "It's like a movie.

Friends like this (crossing his middle and pointer finger) and one of us gets in potentially

big trouble. And we've gotta test our loyalty against all odds. Exciting. I feel like

Chuck Norris." The reference to Chuck Norris, perhaps one of the most extreme

examples of hyper-masculinity available in the cinema, weakens our belief in Lane's

philosophy on group loyalty because Lane's adherence to important values are motivated

by fictional representations in the media rather than firmly rooted in reality. Jon Lewis

agrees that "the role of the media in how teens view their own lives [becomes] an issue"

(*Road to Ruin* 17). While loyalty is an admirable character trait that Lane fervently

adheres to, it is so warped that Lane becomes a parody of himself. He "lampoons…the

value of fidelity" (Lewis *Road to Ruin* 16), warping the notion of loyalty to the group to

tie into his model of hyper-masculinity. The fact that he poses like a rocker (holding his

arms at ninety degree angles with his pointer and pinky fingers erect with the others held

down) when he discusses group loyalty only further adds to our notions that he is

assuming a pose of masculinity. A discussion of loyalty, however, leads to an

investigation of who Lane was being so passionately loyal *to*: John.

    With even more evidence, in my opinion, of homosexual tension and veiled

homosocial relationships than in *Rebel*, *River's Edge* at the least implies homosexual

tendencies within Lane himself and strongly implies a connection between Lane and

John. Although Lane is seemingly involved in a heterosexual relationship with Clarissa, it is a strained one, and for several reasons.   When Matt first hints at a sexual interest in Clarissa while driving to Feck's house, Lane says, "Keep your hands off Clarissa, dude!" The boys look at each other and laugh and Lane remarks, "Shit, what am I worried about?" The sarcasm in Lane's statements combined with the boys' laughter alerts us that Lane doesn't really care about his heterosexual relationship with Clarissa – he is more interested in a homosexual one. During the same conversation, Lane states that "John was getting all out of control" the previous night, to which Matt says, "I'll bet." These statements hold a very thinly veiled allusion to a homosexual encounter between John and Lane.

When Matt and Lane arrive at Feck's house, and Feck states that his girlfriend "had it coming," Lane supports him, stating, "I know, Feck. Women are evil. You had to kill her." Simon Reynolds and Joy Press refer to a "rebel" (in this case a sexual rebel/deviant) as one who "may worship an abstract femininity (a home away from home) while ferociously despising and fearing real-life women" (3). This definition certainly applies to Lane in that he "worships" John and his friends, who serve as a family away from home, and by the fact that he clearly favors men over women. Going so far as to call women "evil," he disrespects Clarissa, referring to her as a "stupid bitch," and constantly repeats that Jamie is dead but "John is still alive!" When Lane changes the subject to John in a conversation focusing on Jamie, it is clear who he is more interested in discussing.

There is a great deal of evidence for Lane's homosexuality in the film, much of it coming from Clarissa's comments on his masculinity. First, although Clarissa is

supposed to be Lane's girlfriend, she ridicules him for his sexual inadequacies. She tells

Matt, "You should see him though when none of the other guys are around and he's alone

with me and he thinks he might get lucky. He shakes like a leaf. Always has to be

drunk, too." What Clarissa reveals is not Lane's nervousness over being able to perform

sexually for her, it is his fear of the heterosexual encounter itself. He is scared when

"none of the other guys are around," and "has to be drunk" in order to force himself to be

with her. He does not "think he might get lucky"; he is upset over having to be with her

(instead of John) and having to prove himself to her sexually. Clarissa also calls Lane

"lost," referring to his sexual identity no doubt. The most telling statement, however, is

made when Clarissa says, "You'd love that, wouldn't you? You and John can run off and

be outlaws together!" Her statement hints not only at their reckless, deviant behavior, but

it also references their closeness as a pair. Also, when people "run off" and do

something, usually it refers to some kind of forbidden relationship, forcing the couple to

run away together, separate from everyone else.

The strongest evidence for Lane's homosexual attraction to and homosocial bond

with John comes specifically from Lane's own words. If his insistence on protecting

John throughout the film is not enough to convince us that Lane is homosexual and has a

very different form of masculinity than the other characters, his statements to John

certainly reinforce that this is so. In his whiny voice, Lane tells John, "These things are

important to me. And, believe it or not, *you're* important to me." This is followed by a

cut to a close-up of Lane's face and we can see that he is indeed sincere. When Clarissa

ridicules John in Lane's presence, Lane slams on the brakes and forces her to exit the car,

asking, "You don't understand a God damn thing, do you?" Explaining that "John is still

alive," he continues, "Don't you see that?" The answer is no; Clarissa obviously does not understand and cannot fathom Lane's relationship with John. When Lane is driving during the middle of the night, popping who-knows-what kind of pills to keep himself awake, he says to himself, "I'm gonna take care of you," and, at this point, we know that he is speaking of John.

The final scene of the film reiterates what we have known all along. Matt tries to subdue Lane, who is growing more fanatical by the minute about defending John. Matt refers to John as an "asshole," prompting Lane to state the opposite. Matt then says, "I know you don't care about him that much!" Lane's eyes bulge at this statement, and he says slowly, "You…know…that?" Matt's words infuriate Lane so much that he yells, "You turn on us so easily...I knew that me and John were alone all along!" Are the "you" and the "us" that Lane says referring to Matt and Lane or John and Lane? Or are these words in reference to heterosexuals "you" and homosexuals "us?" The latter analysis is quite possible. Lane then runs along the shore of the river to find John's body. The sight of John's dead body, a male and his love interest, evokes in him a much stronger emotion than when he saw the dead body of Jamie, a female. Lane emits a high-pitched wail that is so unexpected that his friends rush toward him. Perhaps it is because he is crying or the fact that his cries sound so unbelievably similar to a woman's that they are moved to see what is happening. Lane's reduction to tears over the death of his male friend is the final evidence of his sexuality and gender confusion. He is revealed to be a highly feminized male with homosexual tendencies, unlike what the surface message of the film may convey.

Like *Rebel without a Cause*, *River's Edge* has produced a variety of models of masculinity. With such a range of masculinity, from hyper-masculinity to sensitive tough-guy to reasonable father figure to a feminized male who is homosexual, one can only wonder what messages the film is trying to convey to audiences about masculinity and sexuality. Being a film from 1986, *River's Edge* reveals the dominant ideologies about gender and sexuality that were present during the 1980s. Because of growing AIDS awareness, a fear of homosexuality ran rampant during the era and can be seen in *River's Edge* through the death of John and the end of the relationship between John and Lane. While the film certainly implies an existing homosexual tension, particularly through the character Lane, it also shows that this kind of masculinity cannot be allowed to exist. With John dead, the film effectively ends the possibility of a homosocial bond between John and Lane, revealing a more conventional message that a heterosexual union is what is acceptable. This is evidenced through the depiction of Matt sitting next to Clarissa during Jamie's funeral. We can safely assume that the two will end up together, a heterosexual coupling that is suggested (but fails) in *Rebel without a Cause* with the pairing of Judy and Jim. Also, with John dead and Feck proved to be mentally ill, the film points to Matt as the only acceptable model of masculinity. How are we to know which model of masculinity is the "right" one, however, when Matt is insecure and hesitant about his status? Is Matt's masculinity really the right one? The powerful contradictions that are found throughout *River's Edge* would suggest that the models of masculinity are all flawed in some way. The film seems to be confused about what masculinity should be, evidenced by the plethora of models of masculinity that it offers and ultimately rejects. Although the sense of confusion is present, the film concludes the

film with a heterosexual union, an overt message of heterosexuality and conformity that dominated the 1980s.

In both *Rebel without a Cause* and *River's Edge*, it becomes obvious that there is more than one model of masculinity on offer. While the cultural ideologies of the 1950s and the 1980s promote a tough-guy hyper-masculinity and more traditional forms of masculinity, the films would seem to state otherwise. There are highly feminized male characters, emasculated male characters, and troubled hyper-masculine characters which all run counter to the dominant ideologies of the times. What my analyses also reveal is that American culture has not changed. From the 1950s through the 1980s, America has been both unreceptive to varying degrees of masculinity as well as homophobic, unwelcoming to a kind of sexuality that is anything but heterosexual. The endings of *Rebel* and *River's Edge* reinforce the dominant culture's ideology, showing that a more traditional form of masculinity and a heterosexual union between a man and a woman are what is accepted. Despite the notions of conformity that the culture would expect and prefer, the films reveal counter-cultural depictions of masculinity and sexuality. Both *Rebel without a Cause* and *River's Edge* are important, then, in their attempts at honestly portraying degrees of sexuality and masculinity that were unacceptable in American culture at the time of their production.

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